MOLLY McDONALD

A TALE OF THE FRONTIER

By

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CHAPTER I.

An Unpleasant Situation.

When, late in May, 1868, Major Daniel McDonald, Sixth Infantry, was first assigned to command the new three company post established southwest of Fort Dodge, designed to protect the newly discovered Cimarron trail leading to Santa Fe across the desert, and, purely by courtesy, officially termed Fort Devere, he naturally considered it perfectly safe to invite his only daughter to join him there for her summer vacation. Indeed, at that time, there was apparently no valid reason why he should deny himself this pleasure. Except for certain vague rumors regarding uneasiness among the Sioux warriors north of the Platte, the various tribes of the plains were causing no unusual trouble to military authorities, although, of course, there was no time in the history of that country utterly devoid of peril from young raiders, usually aided and abetted by outcast whites. However, the Santa Fe route, by this date, had become a well-traveled trail, protected by scattered posts along its entire route, frequently patrolled by troops, and merely considered dangerous for small parties, south of the Cimarron, where roving Comanches in bad humor might be encountered.

Fully assured as to this by officers met at Fort Ripley, McDonald, who had never before served west of the Mississippi, wrote his daughter a long letter, describing in careful detail the route, set an exact date for her departure, and then, satisfied all was well arranged, set forth with his small command on the long march overland. He had not seen his daughter for over two years, as during her vacation time (she was attending Sunnycrest school, on the Hudson), she made her home with an aunt in Connecticut. This year the aunt was in Europe, not expecting to return until fall, and the father had hopefully counted on having the girl with him once again in Kentucky. Then came his sudden, unexpected transfer west, and the final decision to have her join him there. Why not? If she remained the same high-spirited army girl, she would thoroughly enjoy the unusual experience of a few months of real frontier life, and the only hardship involved would be the long stage ride from Ripley. This, however, was altogether prairie travel, monotonous enough surely, but without special danger, and he could doubtless arrange to meet her himself at Kansas City, or send one of his officers for that purpose.

This was the situation in May, but by the middle of June conditions had greatly changed throughout all the broad plains country. The spirit of savage war had spread rapidly from the Platte to the Rio Pecos, and scarcely a wild tribe remained disaffected. Arapahoe, Cheyenne, Pawnee, Comanche, and Apache alike espoused the cause of the Sioux, and their young warriors, breaking away from the control of older chiefs, became ugly and warlike. Devere, isolated as it was from the main route of travel (the Santa Fe stages still following the more northern trail), heard merely rumors of the prevailing condition through tarrying hunters, and possibly an occasional army courier, yet soon realized the gravity of the situation because of the almost total cessation of travel by way of the Cimarron and the growing insolence of the surrounding Comanches. Details from the small garrison were, under urgent orders from headquarters at Fort Wallace, kept constantly scouting as far south as the fork of the Red river, and then west to the mountains. Squads from the single cavalry company guarded the few caravans venturing still to cross the Cimarron desert, or bore dispatches to Fort Dodge. Thus the few soldiers remaining on duty at the home station became slowly aware that this outburst of savagery was no longer a mere tribal affair. Outrages were reported from the Solomon, the Republican, the Arkansas valleys. A settlement was raided on Smoky Fork; stages were attacked near the Caches, and one burned; a wagon train was ambushed in the Raton pass, and only escaped after desperate fighting. Altogether the situation appeared extremely serious and summer promised war in earnest.

McDonald was rather slow to appreciate the real facts. His knowledge of Indian tactics was exceedingly small, and the utter isolation of his post kept him ignorant. At first he was convinced that it was merely a local disturbance and would end as suddenly as begun. Then, when realization finally came, it was already too late to stop the girl. She would be already on her long journey. What could he do? What immediate steps could he hope to take for her protection? Ordinarily he would not have hesitated, but now a decision was not so easily made. Of his command scarcely thirty men remained at Devere, a mere infantry guard, together with a small squad of cavalrymen, retained for courier service. His only remaining commissioned officer at the post was the partially disabled cavalry captain, acting temporarily as adjutant, because incapacitated for taking the field. He had waited until the last possible moment, trusting that a shift in conditions might bring back some available officer. Now he had to choose between his duty as commander and as father. Further delay was impossible.

Devere was a fort merely by courtesy. In reality it consisted only of a small stockade hastily built of cottonwood timber, surrounding in partial protection a half dozen shacks, and one fairly decent log house. The situation was upon a slight elevation overlooking the fork, some low bluffs, bare of timber but green with June grass to the northward, while in every other direction extended an interminable sand-desert, ever shifting beneath wind blasts, presenting as desolate a scene as eye could witness. The yellow flood of the river, still swollen by melting mountain snow, was a hundred feet from the stockade gate, and on its bank stood the log cavalry stables. Below, a scant half mile away, were the only trees visible, a scraggly grove of cottonwoods, while down the face of the bluff and across the flat ran the slender ribbon of trail. Monotonous, unchanging, it was a desolate picture to watch day after day in the hot summer.

In the gloom following an early supper the two officers sat together in the single room of the cabin, a candle sputtering on the table behind them, smoking silently or moodily discussing the situation. McDonald was florid and heavily built, his gray mustache hanging heavily over a firm mouth, while the Captain was of another type, tall, with dark eyes and hair. The latter by chance opened the important topic.

"By the way, major," he said carelessly, "I guess it is just as well you stopped your daughter from coming out to this hole. Lord, but it would be an awful place for a woman."

"But I didn't," returned the other moodily. "I put it off too long."

"Put it off! Good heavens, man, didn't you write when you spoke about doing so? Do you actually mean the girl is coming—here?"

McDonald groaned.

"That is exactly what I mean, Travers. Damme, I haven't thought of anything else for a week. Oh, I know now I was an old fool even to conceive of such a trip, but when I wrote her I had no conception of what it was going to be like out here. There was not a rumor of Indian trouble a month ago, and when the tribes did break out it was too late for me to get word back east. The fact is, I am in the devil of a fix—without even an officer whom I can send to meet her, or turn her back. If I should go myself it would mean a court-martial."

Travers stared into the darkness through the open door, sucking at his pipe.

"By George, you are in a pickle," he acknowledged slowly. "I supposed she had been headed off long ago. Haven't heard you mention the matter since we first got here. Where do you suppose the lass is by now?"

"Damme, I Haven't Thought of Anything Else for a Week."

"Near as I can tell she would leave Ripley the 18th."

"Humph! Then starting tonight, a good rider might intercept her at Fort Dodge. She would be in no danger traveling alone for that distance. The regular stages are running yet, I suppose?"

"Yes; so far as I know."

"Under guard?"

"Only from the Caches to Fort Union; there has been no trouble along the lower Arkansas yet. The troops from Dodge are scouting the country north, and we are supposed to keep things clear of hostiles down this way."

"Supposed to—yes; but we can't patrol five hundred miles of desert with a hundred men, most of them dough-boys. The devils can break through any time they get ready—you know that. At this minute there isn't a mile of safe country between Dodge and Union. If she was my daughter—"

"You'd do what?" broke in McDonald, jumping to his feet. "I'd give my life to know what to do!"

"Why, I'd sent somebody to meet her—to turn her back if that was possible. Peyton would look after her there at Ripley until you could arrange."

"That's easy enough to say, Travers, but tell me who is there to send? Do you chance to know an enlisted man out yonder who would do—whom you would trust to take care of a young girl alone?"

The captain bent his head on one hand, silent for some minutes.

"They are a tough lot, major; that's a fact, when you stop to call the roll. Those recruits we got at Leavenworth were mostly rough-necks—seven of them in the guard-house tonight. Our best men are all out," with a wave of his hand to the south. "It's only the riff-raff we've got left, at Devere."

"You can't go?"

The captain rubbed his lame leg regretfully.

"No; I'd risk it if I could only ride, but I couldn't sit a saddle."

"And my duty is here; it would cost me my commission."

There was a long thoughtful silence, both men moodily staring out through the door. Away in the darkness unseen sentinels called the hour. Then Travers dropped one hand on the other's knee.

"Dan," he said swiftly, "how about that fellow who came in with dispatches from Union just before dark? He looked like a real man."

"I didn't see him. I was down river with the wood-cutters all day."

Travers got up and paced the floor.

"I remember now. What do you say? Let's have him in, anyhow. They never would have trusted him for that ride if he hadn't been the right sort." He strode over to the door, without waiting an answer. "Here, Carter," he called, "do you know where that cavalryman is who rode in from Fort Union this afternoon?"

A face appeared in the glow of light, and a gloved hand rose to salute.

"He's asleep in 'B's' shack, sir," the orderly replied. "Said he'd been on the trail two nights and a day."

"Reckon he had, and some riding at that. Rout him out, will you? Tell him the major wants to see him here at once."

The man wheeled as if on a pivot, and disappeared.

"If Carter could only ride," began McDonald, but Travers interrupted impatiently.

"If! But we all know he can't. Worst I ever saw, must have originally been a sailor." He slowly refilled his pipe. "Now, see here, Dan, it's your daughter that's to be looked after, and therefore I want you to size this man up for yourself. I don't pretend to know anything about him, only he looks like a soldier, and they must think well of him at Union."

McDonald nodded, but without enthusiasm; then dropped his head into his hands. In the silence a coyote howled mournfully not far away; then a shadow appeared on the log step, the light of the candle flashing on a row of buttons.

"This is the man, sir," said the orderly, and stood aside to permit the other to enter.

CHAPTER II.

"Brick" Hamlin.

The two officers looked up with some eagerness, McDonald straightening in his chair, and returning the cavalryman's salute instinctively, his eyes expressing surprise. He was a straight-limbed fellow, slenderly built, and appearing taller than he really was by reason of his erect, soldierly carriage; thin of waist, broad of chest, dressed in rough service uniform, without jacket, just as he had rolled out of the saddle, rough shirt open at the throat, patched, discolored trousers, with broad yellow stripes down the seam, stuck into service riding boots, a revolver dangling at his left hip, and a soft hat, faded sadly, crushed in one hand.

The major saw all this, yet it was at the man's uncovered face he gazed most intently. He looked upon a countenance browned by sun and alkali, intelligent, sober, heavily browed, with eyes of dark gray rather deeply set; firm lips, a chin somewhat prominent, and a broad forehead, the light colored hair above closely trimmed; the cheeks were darkened by two days' growth of beard. McDonald unclosed, then clenched his hand.

"You are from Fort Union, Captain Travers tells me?"

"Yes, sir," the reply slow, deliberate, as though the speaker had no desire to waste words. "I brought despatches; they were delivered to Captain Travers."

"Yes, I know; but I may require you for other service. What were your orders?"

"To return at convenience."

"Good. I know Hawley, and do not think he would object. What is your regiment?"

"Seventh cavalry."

"Oh, yes, just organized; before that?"

"The Third."

"I see you are a non-com—corporal?"

"Sergeant, sir, since my transfer."

"Second enlistment?"

"No, first in the regulars—the Seventh was picked from other commands."

"I understand. You say first in the regulars. Does that mean you saw volunteer service?"

"Three years, sir."

"Ah!" his eyes brightening instantly. "Then how does it happen you failed to try for a commission after the war? You appear to be intelligent, educated?"

The sergeant smiled.

"Unfortunately my previous service had been performed in the wrong uniform, sir," he said quietly. "I was in a Texas regiment."

There was a moment's silence, during which Travers smoked, and the major seemed to hesitate. Finally the latter asked:

"What is your name, sergeant?"

"Hamlin, sir."

The pipe came out of Travers' mouth, and he half arose to his feet.

"By all the gods!" he exclaimed. "That's it! Now I've got you placed—you're—you're 'Brick' Hamlin!"

The man unconsciously put one hand to his hair, his eyes laughing.

"Some of the boys call me that—yes," he confessed apologetically.

Travers was on his feet now, gesticulating with his pipe.

"Damn! I knew I'd seen your face somewhere. It was two years ago at Washita. Say, Dan, this is the right man for you; better than any fledgling

He Was a Straight Limbed Fellow, Etc.

West Pointer. Why, he is the same lad who brought in Dugan—you heard about that!"

The major shook his head.

"No! Oh, of course not. Nothing that goes on out here ever drifts east of the Missouri. Lord! We might as well be serving a foreign country. Well, listen: I was at Washita then, and had the story first hand. Dugan was a lieutenant in 'D' Troop, out with his first independent command scouting along the Canadian. He knew as much about Indians as a cow does of music. One morning the young idiot left camp with only one trooper along—Hamlin here—and he was a 'rookie,' to follow up what looked like a fresh trail. Two hours later they rode slap into a war party, and the fracas was on. Dugan got a ball through the body at the first fire that paralyzed him. He was conscious, but couldn't move. The rest was up to Hamlin. You ought to have heard Dugan tell it when he got so he could speak. Hamlin dragged the boy down into a buffalo wallow, shot both horses, and got behind them. It was all done in the jerk of a lamb's tail. They had two Henry rifles, and the 'rookie' kept them both hot. He got some of the bucks, too, but of course, we never knew how many. There were twenty in the party, and they charged twice, riding their ponies almost to the edge of the wallow, but Hamlin had fourteen shots without reloading, and they couldn't quite make it. Dugan said there were nine dead ponies within a radium of thirty feet. Anyhow it was five hours before 'D' troop came up, and that's what they found when they got there—Dugan laid out, as good as dead, and Hamlin shot twice, and only ten cartridges left. Hell," he added disgustedly, "and you never even heard of it east of the Missouri."

There was a flush of color on the sergeant's cheeks, but he never moved.

"There was nothing else to do but what I did," he explained simply. "Any of the fellows would have done the same if they had been up against it the way I was. May I ask," his eyes first upon one and then the other inquiringly, "what it was you wanted of me?"

McDonald drew a long breath.

"Certainly, sergeant, sit down—yes, take that chair."

He described the situation in a few words, and the trooper listened quietly until he was done. Travers interrupted once, his voice emerging from a cloud of smoke. As the major concluded, Hamlin asked a question or two gravely.

"How old is your daughter, sir?"

"In her twentieth year."

"Have you a picture of the young lady?"

The major crossed over to his fatigue coat hanging on the wall, and extracted a small photograph from an inside pocket.

"This was taken a year ago," he explained, "and was considered a good likeness then."

Hamlin took the card in his hands, studied the face a moment, and then placed it upon the table.

"You figure she ought to leave Ripley on the 18th," he said slowly. "Then I shall need to start at once to make Dodge in time."

"You mean to go then? Of course, you realize I have no authority to order you on such private service."

"That's true. I'm a volunteer, but I'll ask you for a written order just the same in case my troop commander should ever object, and I'll need a fresh horse; I rode mine pretty hard coming up here."

"You shall have the pick of the stables, sergeant," interjected the cavalry captain, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Anything else? Have you had rest enough?"

"Four hours," and the sergeant stood up again. "All I require will be two days' rations, and a few more revolver cartridges. The sooner I'm off the better."

It he heard Travers' attempt at conversation as the two stumbled together down the dark hill, he paid small attention. At the stables, aided by a smoky lantern, he picked out a tough-looking buckskin mustang, with an evil eye; and, using his own saddle and bridle, he finally led the half-broken animal outside.

"That buckskin's the devil's own," protested Travers, careful to keep to one side.

"I'll take it out of him before morning," was the reply. "Come on, boy! easy now—easy! How about the rations, captain?"

"Carter will have them for you at the gate of the stockade. Do you know the trail?"

"Well enough to follow—yes."

McDonald was waiting with Carter, and the dim gleam of the lantern revealed his face.

"Remember, sergeant, you are to make her turn back if you can. Tell her I wish her to do so—yes, this letter will explain everything, but she is a pretty high-spirited girl, and may take the bit in her teeth—imagine she'd rather be here with me, and all that. If she does I suppose you'll have to let her have her own way—the Lord knows her mother always did. Anyhow you'll stay with her till she's safe."

"I sure will," returned the sergeant, gathering up his reins. "Good-by to you."

"Good-by and good luck," and McDonald put out his hand, which the other took hesitatingly. The next instant he was in the saddle, and with a wild leap the startled mustang rounded the edge of the bluff, flying into the night.

All had occurred so quickly that Hamlin's mind had not yet fully adjusted itself to all the details. He was naturally a man of few words, deciding on a course of action quietly, yet not apt to deviate from any conclusion finally reached. But he had been hurried, pressed into this adventure, and now welcomed an opportunity to think it all out coolly. At first, for a half mile or more, the plunging buckskin kept him busy, bucking viciously, rearing, leaping madly from side to side, practising every known equine trick to dislodge the grim rider in the saddle. The man fought out the battle silently, immovable as a rock, and apparently as indifferent. Twice his spurs brought blood, and once he struck the rearing head with clenched fist. The light of the stars revealed the faint lines of the trail, and he was content to permit the maddened brute to race forward, until, finally mastered, the animal settled down into a swift gallop, but with ears laid back in ugly defiance. The rider's gray eyes smiled pleasantly as he settled more comfortably into the saddle, peering out from beneath the stiff brim of his scouting hat; then they hardened, and the man swore softly under his breath.

The peculiar nature of this mission which he had taken upon himself had been recalled. He was always doing something like that—permitting himself to become involved in the affairs of others. Now why should he be here, riding alone through the dark to prevent this unknown girl from reaching Devere? She was nothing to him—even that glimpse of her pictured face had not impressed him greatly; rather interesting, to be sure, but nothing extraordinary; besides he was not a woman's man, and, through years of isolation, he had grown to avoid contact with the sex—and he was under no possible obligation to either McDonald or Travers. Yet here he was, fully committed, drawn into the vortex, by a hasty ill-considered decision. He was tired still from his swift journey across the desert from Fort Union, and now faced another three days' ride. Then what? A headstrong girl to be convinced of danger, and controlled. The longer he thought about it all, the more intensely disagreeable the task appeared, yet the clearer did he appreciate its necessity. He chafed at the knowledge that it had become his work—that he had permitted himself to be ensnared—yet he dug his spurs into the mustang and rode steadily, grimly, forward.

The real truth was that Hamlin comprehended much more fully than did the men at Devere the danger menacing travelers along the main trail to Santa Fe. News reached Fort Union much quicker than it did that isolated post up on the Cimarron. He knew of the fight in Raton Pass, and that two stages within ten days had been attacked, one several miles east of Bent's Fort. This must mean that a desperate party of raiders had succeeded in slipping past those scattered army details scouting into the northwest. Whether or not these warriors were in any considerable force he could not determine—the reports of their depredations were but rumors at Union when he left—yet, whether in large body or small, they would have a clear run in the Arkansas Valley before any troops could be gathered together to drive them out. Perhaps ever now, the stages had been withdrawn, communication with Santa Fe abandoned. This had been spoke of as possible at Union the night he left, for it was well known that there was no cavalry force left at Dodge which could be utilized as guards. The wide map of the surrounding region spread out before him in memory; he felt its brooding desolation, its awful loneliness. Nevertheless he must go on—perhaps at the stage station near the ford of the Arkansas he could learn the truth. So he bent lower over the buckskin's neck and rode straight through the black, silent night.

It was a waterless desert stretching between the Cimarron and the Arkansas, consisting of almost a dead level of alkali and sand, although toward the northern extremity the sand had been driven by the ceaseless wind into grotesque hummocks. The trail, cut deep by traders' wagons earlier in the spring, was still easily traceable for a greater part of the distance, and Hamlin as yet felt no need of caution—this was a country the Indians would avoid, the only danger being from some raiding party from the south. At early dawn he came trotting down into the Arkansas valley, and gazed across at the greenness of the opposite bank. There, plainly in view, were the deep ruts of the main trail running close in against the bluff. His tired eyes caught no symbol of life either up or down the stream, except a thin spiral of blue smoke that slowly wound its way upward. An instant he stared, believing it to be the fire of some emigrant's camp; then realized that he looked upon the smouldering debris of the stage station.

(To be continued)